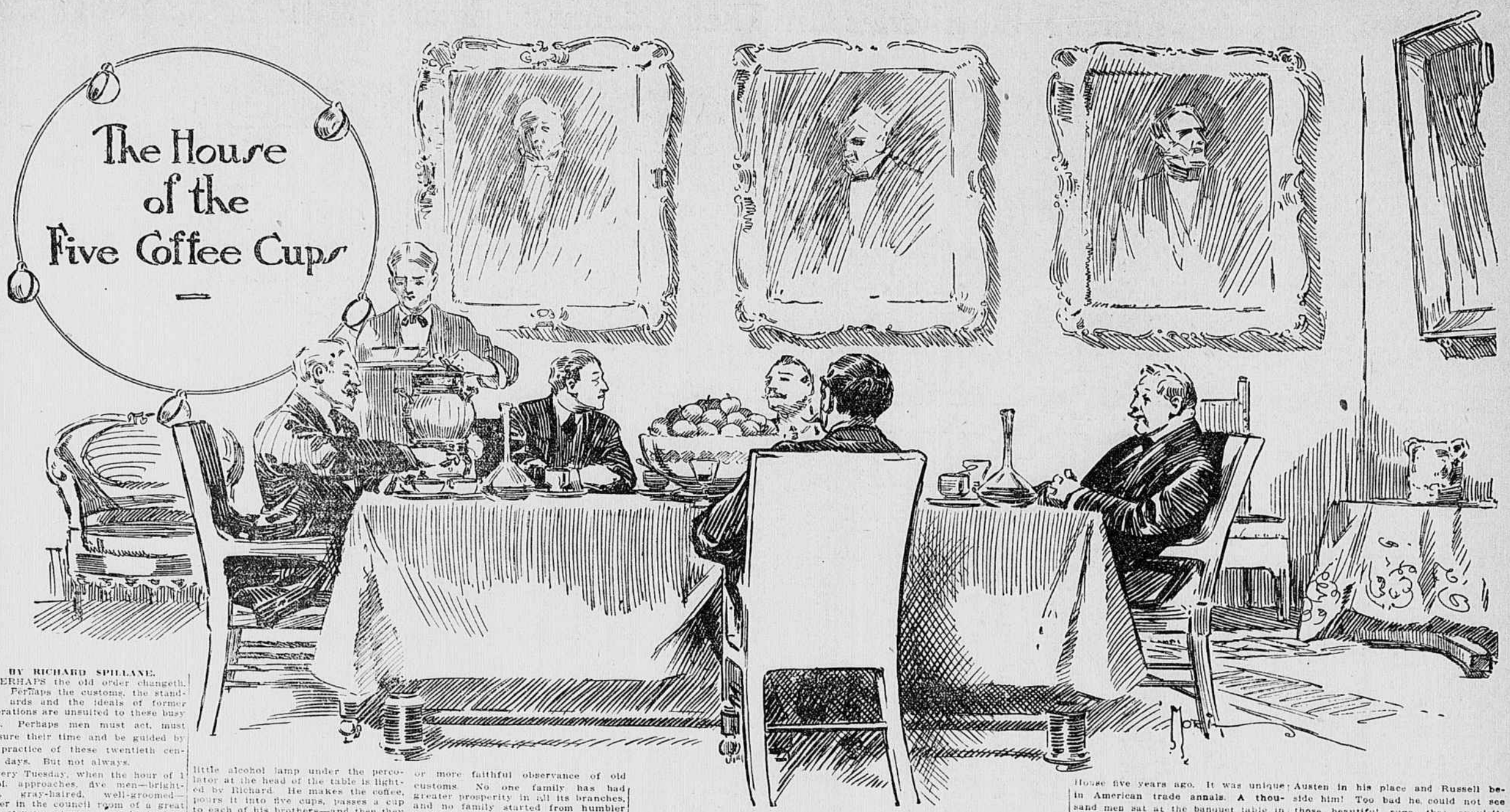
REAL ROMANCES OF THE BUSINESS WORLD



BY RICHARD SPILLANE.

PERHAPS the old order changeth. Perhaps the customs, the standards and the ideals of former generations are unsuited to these busy days. Perhaps men must act, must measure their time and be guided by the practice of these twentieth century days. But not always.

Every Tuesday, when the hour of 1 P. M. approaches, five men—bright-eyed, gray-haired, well-groomed—gather in the council room of a great office structure just across the Hudson from Manhattan, and take their places at a long table, upon which luncheon is spread. The room is simply but handsomely furnished. The table is of the finest wood, the chairs of quartered oak. Handsome rugs cover the floor.

The five are brothers. Richard, the eldest, goes to the head of the table. The others take precedence according to their ages. When they take their seats, and the door through which they have entered is closed, the hand of time is turned back one century.

Each of the five is a millionaire several times over. Their names are known the world around. A university bears their name. So does a great banking concern. Their agents are in every land. Their great manufacturing establishment across the street from their office building has a floor space of many acres. A thousand men work in it. Some of these employes have been with the house for more than fifty years. A dozen or more have worked there for forty-five years. Scores have been in the employ of the house thirty years or more.

Every Tuesday, at 1 o'clock, the little alcohol lamp under the percolator at the head of the table is lighted by Richard. He makes the coffee, pours it into five cups, passes a cup to each of his brothers—and then they lunch. In the centre of the table stands a great bowl of fruit, usually apples. Five little cups of custard sit in a row nearby. There are sandwiches and meats. The plates are exquisite, of the finest make. The coffee cups and saucers would delight a woman's heart. The table linen is beautiful, the silver of handsome pattern. And at the far end of the table is a pie, which shows that those five brothers, or some of them at least, have never quite grown up.

As they eat and drink at this weekly function they have their ancestors for company, for the walls are covered with portraits of the members of their family who have gone beyond.

Sometimes those five brothers have to walk only from their private offices in the great building to the council chamber. Sometimes one or more of them have to travel long distances to be present. Generally they make their engagements so that nothing will interfere with this family gathering. In no other great industry in America, perhaps, is the family tie so strong as in this one. In no family, perhaps, is there a greater spirit of unity or more faithful observance of old customs. No one family has had greater prosperity in all its branches, and no family started from humbler beginnings.

'Way back in the days when George Washington was President of the United States, the head of this house was driven from his native land, England, because of his radical speech and his avowed sympathy with the young republic. He came to America an immigrant, high in hope, with lofty ambitions and an abounding faith. But misfortune dogged his steps. The little money he brought with him was soon lost, and when he died he was in debt. He had one great asset, a son. This boy, named William, started in business when he was seventeen years old by apprenticing himself to a soapmaker. In 1806, when barely twenty-one, he rented a house of two stories in Dutch Street, where he launched a business of his own.

The soap kettle that he set up was very small, and for several years the output was not so large that he could not attend to every detail. But when he got a customer he did not lose him. What he made was well made and honest. His office was on the ground floor, not far from the soap kettle. Upstairs were the living quarters, and every evening the little family gathered around the table and held council.

There may not be much sentiment about soap, but that little kettle of 1806, the old ledger in which the boy merchant made records of his first accounts, the padlock of the outer door, and the family portrait of those days are among the greatest treasures of the grandsons to-day, almost as greatly treasured as the receipts the youth got when he cleared his father's debts.

From that little soap kettle in that little old house on Dutch Street has grown one of the greatest businesses of to-day. Now the agents of the house are in Australia, in South America, in Asia, in Africa, in Europe. Two hundred branches of trade have developed out of the original line.

Perfumes almost take rank in importance with the staple article of production. The world is searched for oils and essences to supply this one branch of the industry. Hundreds of tons of rose leaves are imported to have their sweet odors pressed out in the great factory. Hundreds and hundreds of tons of sweet-scented woods are brought from over seas to yield their fragrance.

The boy of twenty-one who started this business lived to a ripe old age, and saw his establishment grow to large proportions. He had many sons. One started the business that has developed into the National Lead Company. One went out into Wall Street, and, with the family support, established a banking house that is to-day one of the strongest in the street. He was known as a philanthropist, and gave millions in the cause of charity and education. Two million dollars alone he gave to the university that bears the family name. Once a day he, like all the other sons, gathered round the family board to take counsel, to plan, to report and to exchange opinions. The two-story house in Dutch Street, with its modest soap kettle, always was the rallying point.

As the business outgrew this little house, the building next door was bought, and later on a building in John Street had to be acquired. Larger and larger grew the kettle; larger and larger grew the volume of business. In 1847 it had grown so big that Dutch Street and John Street alone could not contain it. The factory was moved to Jersey City, and there a great kettle which was the wonder of its time was put up. But still the headquarters remained in the little old house on Dutch Street.

William lived until 1857, and when he died he was succeeded by his sixth son, Samuel. In the forty years that Samuel sat at the head of the table, made the coffee and presided at the family councils he saw changes greater almost than those of his father's time. He saw the giant kettle that his father built, and which was supposed to be so huge that it never would be filled, dwindle to pygmy size when measured alongside those that followed. He saw the business spread and spread until it reached the world around.

When Samuel died in 1897 his five sons, Richard M., Gilbert, Sidney M., Austen and Russell, succeeded him. Just as their father had been trained for the business, so were they. All five had been sent to the same university—Yale. All five have been graduated. Each in turn was given a course in the main branches of the family business. All were ready to take up their appointed duties when the time arrived for them to take hold. In each and all, the family instinct, unity of purpose and reverence for the old order of things was encouraged. If any one thinks such a training blunts enterprise he is mistaken. Each one of the five vies with the other to advance the industry. Every economy known to science in this particular branch is introduced. The house makes its own labels. Artists and lithographers work on the designs. Artists are sent to foreign lands to study the work of other designers in order to broaden their ideas and absorb the atmosphere of other schools. Inventors are welcomed, and every device that will improve the business is received with favor. Machines of wonderful intricacy are introduced. Transportation experts are employed to attend to the distribution of the company's products. Sales agents, when masters of their line, command great salaries; chemists of the first rank are spurred to highest endeavor to find new combinations of perfumes that will catch the public taste. Their artists reap handsome rewards when they fashion bottles of particularly attractive shape. Anything or everything in the way of an invention or improvement is taken up with avidity.

It is a wonderful business combination these men of the House of the Five Coffee Cups make, yet in all their business activities they never depart from the family custom and the family bond. And, strong as is the family bond with them, it almost is as strong with their employes, for they have absorbed the spirit of their employers. Nothing illustrated this better than the celebration of the centenary of the House five years ago. It was unique in American trade annals. A thousand men sat at the banquet table in the Grand Central Palace in Manhattan. While the thousand men were at table more than a thousand women and children, the wives, the mothers, the sons and daughters of the employes, gathered in the galleries and looked down. It was the greatest family party in the history of this great family!

The quaint little kettle in which the first batch of soap was cooked was there for all to see. So was the padlock that did service so long on the front door of the old house in Dutch Street. So was the ledger in which William, the boy of twenty-one, made his first records as a business man.

Richard sat at the head of the table, at this feast of a thousand men. Austen acted as toastmaster. Richard brewed the coffee, as his grandfather had done a hundred years before. One of the speechmakers was a man who had been with the firm for fifty years. He had started as an errand boy. Another was an old Irishman who had been with the factory staff for half a century. There was another who had started as a mail boy before the Civil War, and who had answered the call of Lincoln. He served his country on the field of battle, and when peace came he returned to his work in the House of the Five Coffee Cups. There were nine men at the banquet who were in the forty-five-year class, fourteen in the forty-year service class, thirty in the thirty-five-year class and thirty in the thirty-year class. There were women, too, at the banquet table. Some of them had been in the company's service many years, but none long enough to be in the twenty-five-year class.

The men from the factory and the men from the offices were not the only ones who were there. The foreign representatives of the House were brought from all the lands of the globe. They were there from Australia, from the Argentine, from France, from Italy, from Canada, from Bulgaria, from Spain—everywhere. And while the big family feasted every wheel in the mammoth factory acros the Hudson was stilled.

The old boys told anecdotes of old New York and of their early days. Most of the employes had been down to visit the little old house in Dutch Street before going to the banquet hall. Soap and sentiment are not usually allied, but in this instance they are.

Until a year ago the offices of this great house remained in that old Dutch Street building and its annexes, with the furniture of olden times retained and cherished as priceless heirlooms. But now the headquarters of the business is in a mammoth structure near the great factory across the river from Manhattan. The little Dutch Street house retains its memories—and little more.

Dickens dwelt with loving warmth upon the Cheerybie Brothers; their rosy faces, their kindly eyes, their family spirit. Few pictures that the great writer drew were more pleasing than those about those two old merchants of London town.

What a pity the master writer could not have known the men of the House of the Five Coffee Cups! Too bad he could not wander into Dutch Street, where so much of the history of New York and some of the history of America was made! Too bad he could not view the little old kettle in which the elder William boiled his first batch of 'soap! Too bad he could not look upon the old ledger, the old padlock, the old desk and the old chairs and the old table of the first council room! Too bad he could not look upon the house in John Street into which the busines spread. !Too bad he could not see the factory across the Hudson, which is one of the landmarks of the American Rhine! Too bad he could not look upon the great office structure which is in touch with every part of the world! Too bad he could not wander in some Tuesday at 1 o'clock in the afternoon, and see the council chamber to-day, with Richard at the head of the board, a percolator by his side, with Gilbert in his seat, Sidney in his, Austen in his place and Russell beside him! Too bad he could not see those beautiful rugs, that exquisite napery and that bowl of rosy apples—and that pie!

He would swell at length upon the things to eat—for Dickens loved the good things of life. As a sentimentalist, he would give great space to the portraits that enrich the walls. He would picture the character of this one, of that one; he would glory in the prospect that a house with such traditions and such a guilding spirit will go on and on for ages. He would dwell at length upon the beauty of the family custom, the strength of it, the charm of it all—and then, like the gentle humorist he was, he would turn his attention to the far end of the table and have fun with that pie!

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